

THE SPOKEN WORD

A MID-WINTER
BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

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BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT FINLEY

To the men of February, 1910:

You must be missing this week the traditional and delightful accompaniments of the baccalaureate ceremonies which your June brothers know. The laurel is not in berry. The oratorical adage and the rhetorical words of advice are not in season. The city about is not thinking of vacation and rest, of mountains and seashore. It is at work, busy even in its play, and it will hardly look up to make place for you, much less to celebrate your entrance. Your laureation must, therefore, be made with leaves alone.

But I want to help you to feel the joy of the commencement none the less, though you graduate near the winter solstice and under a new star and a new sign of the zodiac (or, as Dante put it, when the "fishes are quivering on your horizon," when "the sun is tempering his locks beneath Aquarius and the nights are passing to the south"). You will be pioneers of the new traditions in the American college calendar, and I wish that you may make them happy traditions. The ancients had their hiemal garlands as well as æstival and why shall we not make our winter summer, in the celebration of our hopes—which have no season—for you who have endured our disciplines and are, in and out of season, to represent our faith in better things?

I have wished many times during the last three or four years that I could find some distinguishing name for you who go out in winter, when one has to shake the snow from the laurel in gathering even the leaves for your graduation. But I have thought of none that will be permanently distinctive. In the precession of the equinoxes your February successors will some day (if we assume the continuance of the College and the custom through enough centuries) be graduated under the star and zodiacal sign of your June brothers and you under theirs. And the precession of our thoughts traveling more

quickly over this cycle of ten thousand years sees you all of one company and under one star and sign.

I take my theme, therefore, not of the seasons nor even of the times (as the custom has come to be), but of a need that stands at our doors in winter and summer, in times of depression and in times of prosperity. I am not going to speak to you of what you owe the nation, as graduates of one of her great democratic colleges, nor even of your peculiar obligation of service to this city (though it is difficult to keep myself from this theme). I am going to speak of something which you may think to be neither vital nor particularly appropriate, but which, as I see it, has in it elements of all your other obligations to the city, the nation, your fellow men—elements of patriotism, altruism and religion. I shall disappoint you, perhaps, when I tell you that what I am thinking of is your duty to the English tongue, the language which was mother to the first speech of some of you and which has been the patient foster mother to others. For think of the significance of this miraculous, mysterious gift, made as commonplace as light by use, often ugly and foul by abuse, and frequently hateful to the ignorant or indolent by its grammatical restraints of law and custom. When an ancient writer, trying to express the revelation of his God to him, said that it was "the word become flesh," it was no careless figure of speech that he used. And there is no better definition of language in its highest significance than that suggested by this same figure; that it is the flesh become spirit—the man become the word.

You have lived a good part of these fifteen years in the places where the word, the spirit of others, teachers, parents, the whole past, has been becoming the man in you. And I hope this process will not cease so long as you have flesh in which the spirit can reveal itself. But I think to-day rather of the other mystical process, the translation of the flesh in you into the word that shall in turn make your aspiration (which is your being breathed toward or into words) live in still other men. I follow Carlyle in the thought that what I am this moment saying (putting into words) came to me, in a sense,

from the most ancient of days, from the word which was in the beginning of man's speech, and I follow him too in that other thought, that what I am this moment saying (whatever its value), what you are this moment thinking in that same language, will go on to an endless future, will go on "so long as motion continues." For we are no better able to conceive of a loss of spiritual than of physical energy. As a pebble cast into the ocean affects the seven seas, so does a word that falls upon human ears anywhere touch in a sense the whole course of human existence.

I once heard that great historian and librarian, Justin Winsor, say, years and years ago, out on the further shore of Lake Michigan: "Oh if we could but find an instrument delicate enough, sensitive enough, to gather and recall to our ears the vibrations of voices gone! What should we not hear? We should hear the prayer of Columbus out upon the Atlantic; we should hear the song of Marquette in the forests of the west as he ministered to the Indians; we should hear the voice of the Greek Philosopher in the Academe!"

But whether the vibrations of these voices of the past be gathered and distinguished to our ears, or those who come after (as voices are gathered by wireless from the midst of noises about us in the present) still are they recorded somewhere in human life on this planet not less certainly than is registered by an anemometer the breath of wind on this hill, which disturbs for a moment and so for eternity the equilibrium of force in the universe. "Their words have gone out to the end of the world" in a very true sense, though it be not in the sense in which that expression was used by the Psalmist, or by that very eminent scientist on our neighboring plateau, who showed not long ago in my hearing how the stars of the firmament in an alphabet all their own were telling what is burning in their bodies, even though their "voice is not heard."

And so will your words go out to the end of the world even though their vibrations reach audibly only to the boundary of a very small circle, for if not a sparrow falls to the ground without notice in the divine economy, if not an atom of matter

in this universe is destroyed or is destructible, so shall not a word perish out of your mouths.

If this be true (and can it be logically else?) how important becomes the word—that expression of yourselves in which your flesh becomes spirit and wanders free of you to work good or ill in the earth among men. And by its importance am I justified in asking your special pledge of devotion, as I speak for the last time to you as a class before you go up for your degrees—your devotion to the accurate, appreciative, conscientious use of the tongue in which all your knowledges are latent, without which thought itself is impotent—your devotion to the protection of this tongue from corruption by the sloven, the ignorant, the vicious; your devotion to its ennobling. And it is not an appeal to a devotion to mere forms, for words are living things, since in them and by them alone, for most of us, can thought climb to the higher levels of existence and breathe there.

Two mornings ago, I read in a New York daily paper of the graduation exercises of a school for the teaching of the children of foreigners. Special mention was made of the salute of the flag by those children who in traces of tongues that had been confused since the days of the dispersion from Babel on the plains of Shinar, were trying to sing the same song and to repeat the same oath of allegiance to what the flag stood for. I was reminded that H. G. Wells, the English author, seeing this same sight, spoke of it as the “most touching thing he had seen in America,” and hearing these exiled children singing, not with sadness as those who sang by the waters of Babylon, but with very real emotion, if with “a considerable variety of accent and distinctness,” exclaimed: “The promise in it all,” “the flower of belief and effort that may spring from this warm sowing!” But the promise is in the broken speech as well as in the vague patriotic emotion—the promise is in the approach of that varied accent to the language in which the history and the hopes of the song and the oath are written, saying: “We do pledge our hearts, our lives and our sacred honor to love and protect thee.”

When the Gileadites stood at the fords of Jordan, at the passages where the fleeing Ephraimites would cross, they asked every man to pronounce the name for stream, and when one "could not frame to pronounce it right" but said "Sibboleth" instead of "Shibboleth" he was straightway slain. How fortunate that the Gileadites in America, the early comers to this land, put no such phonetic test at the passages to this continent. If they had, neither your ancestors nor mine would have come in. They let the Ephraimites in and afterward tried to make them pronounce their "S's" aspirate instead of sibilant, with the result that all become patriotic Gileadites. And the Gileadites multiply though we still hear the silibant when we put our "Shibboleth."

There are over half a million children in our elementary schools; and the curriculum shows that over a third, if not half, the time of these children there is spent in the study of the tongue of our daily life (Ephraimites and Gileadites alike). This is the most difficult task of our whole educational undertaking here in New York, where the gathered confusion of tongues uninstructed would mean what the imposed confusion meant at Babel—that we should "leave off to build the city." But difficult or not it is the most important, for if that gift of words is not given, all other gifts, of state and lineage and environment, are diminished in value if not made wholly worthless.

We are proud, as your teachers of the earlier years must be, of what some of you have done in the conquest of a language other than your native tongue. I recall a debate here in your college life, in which three young men all of foreign birth but educated wholly in our public schools and our public college, competed in their acquired tongue with eloquent sons of three of the oldest and best American families, discussing a problem of American politics; and winning the contest. And yet when I tried to congratulate the father of one of those sturdy debaters I found that he could speak only through one of his bi-lingual children. I heard two or three years ago the best speech that I have ever heard from a

young college graduate and he, too, had had to learn to speak in another tongue than his mother's. There are many such heroisms here of the finest sort in this naturalization of an alien tongue to the idiosyncrasies and idioms of our own language, heroisms that tell of a patriotism deeper than that which is learned of a pride of birth or of a provincial self-satisfaction. "You will come to respect your country," said Wells, even while he walked in the reeking street after seeing that salutation of the flag and hearing that half articulate song. And I have come into a greater respect for my tongue, when I have heard it spoken accurately and with distinction by one who was not to the language born, but who learned it in democracy's school.

I wish this were the whole story; that I could even be sure that it was the greater part of the story. But I shall not recite that remaining part here this afternoon. You have read some of it in magazines, in educational journals and the daily papers. You have even heard some part of it in the careless, slovenly, ungrammatical, formless, inaccurate speech that occasionally assails your own ears, even within these walls. You have perhaps heard echoes of the cry in France and Germany that the democratization of learning has been followed by deterioration in speech.

This is a charge which a college supported of democracy must answer. It cannot in its curriculum provide what should have been given in the earlier years. But it must be insistent that somehow that speech shall be learned and that he who goes from its gates shall go knowing his tongue, and able to speak it (so far as his ancestral muscles will let him "frame to pronounce it right"). There is much to be done, but what has been done and done so splendidly, can be done, yet only by constant insistence on the part of the teacher and hourly persistence on the part of the taught. I am proud to remember that this College was among the first, if not the very first of American colleges to provide formal training in English.

I was reading last night in a recent magazine a poem several pages in length, written by Helen Keller, both blind and deaf from infancy. And when I realized in this beautiful example of the written word what one could do who had neither sight nor hearing, and remembered how accurately, if mechanically, she uttered the spoken word, I found myself having little charity for the shortcomings (some reputed and some known) of the American college man in English. If I were to excuse some that I have known, it would be because of the very sense of hearing which Miss Keller lacked, since one hears so much imperfect English, that only a deaf man or one of impregnable vocabulary could follow faithfully the models of the schools.

In a book of letters from Egypt which I read years ago I remember that the writer, Lady Duff Gordon, tells of a native of Luxor who always made a prayer over her ink bottle as he filled it with fresh ink. I have forgotten the words of the prayer but it was in substance such a prayer as I would have said over every ink-well and every can of printer's ink in the civilization that is far above that which the poor man of Luxor knew. But I would have a like prayer made daily over the speech that goes from our lips, that it shall say what we mean, at any rate when we mean our best, and that it shall mean to others exactly what we try to say.

You perhaps recall the classification which I made in the early years of your course—the classification of those who do not tell the truth: first, those who do not know the truth and so tell it only by accident if at all; second, those who know the truth but knowing it, desire not to tell it; and third those who know the truth, or who know it vaguely, and who desire to tell it but know not how. And can we say that one is educated as a sovereign if one, knowing and willing the truth, is not able to speak it, when his family, his neighbors, his city, the future wait for his voice?

We need philologists, in the original meaning of that word, men in every walk of life who will use speech conscientiously, discriminatingly, intelligently, yet without pedantry, or show.

The papers tell of the Mayor's praise of college men in cleaning the streets; and all college men should be proud of that service given by one of their number. I hope that graduates of this college will come to serve the city in its every department. That is our peculiar opportunity and obligation as I see it. But incidentally you can constitute yourselves volunteer members of a speech cleaning department, and begin each by keeping clean and improving the speech before his own door, in the midst of the Babel of voices about you.

We have free speech. What we want now is clear speech, speech restrained to truth, speech expanded to truth. For the truth, has as a rule to come to speech to get itself made known. Democracy needs lovers of pure speech who can teach her children, who can write her laws for her, who can compose an amendment to the constitution that needs not to be interpreted, who can discover to others in plain unambiguous English the good from the evil which they have themselves discerned. And here in this city, as in no other place, is such speech needed, for here is peculiarly the place of the decision of things; and that decision has ultimately to be made in the flesh that becomes word.

The Prophet Joel saw in his vision a place in which there were multitudes and multitudes of men, a place which he called the Valley of Decision. Virgil speaks to Dante of that same valley where millions of spirits go back to join their bodies. And the great valley filled with multitudes and multitudes, which I see stretch away from this hill, is as that Prophet's valley of threshing, of decision. For here are some of the world's most difficult questions to be threshed out, decided, and in the threshing, the flails of your tongues as well as of your minds will be needed. I can say no more, except to speak the hope that when your words, the spirit of your thoughts, come back to find your bodies here years hence, men will see this valley as the Prophet Joel saw another in his vision—as the Valley of Acacias watered by the brooks of perfect speech.